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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on alternative programs to current educational practice as a means of overcoming some institutional barriers to change. The program reported on the Tucson Early Education Model, a comprehensive educational program which encompasses all of the criterial attributes of the open classroom as specified in the introduction to this paper. Specifically, this paper specifies how certain psychological principles may be used to provide an effective learning environment for young children. In the natural environment children acquire many complex skills, largely through observational learning. The teacher who is aware of the ways in which modeling influences children, and of the conditions which facilitate the effects of modeling, is in a position to influence the growth of children in a very positive and natural way. Another way in which the environment can teach is by providing cues, i.e., objects or events in the environment which, as the child learns to discriminate them, signal appropriate behavior. A third characteristic of an effective learning environment is that it reinforces children for their purposeful and constructive behavior. An important assumption in the program is that responsibility for learning must in the final analysis rest with the student. (CK)

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In many varied ways, sensitive observers of the contemporary educational scene are crying out that in all but a very few isolated instances, schools are drab, dreary, and unexciting places and that their programs are poorly designed to foster the development of the children who are placed in them. If schools are unexciting places for children, they are also unchallenging and unstimulating for many of the more visionary and idealistic teachers who are obliged to carry out their programs. In response to this "crisis" there has been a rash of publications by disenchanted teachers who have made individual efforts to open their classrooms and enable students to pursue more exciting learning experiences by nurturing the children's own interests.¹

Other writers, such as Silberman,² have produced penetrating and insightful critiques of current educational practice and have identified a limited number of programs which have overcome at least some of the institutional barriers to change. Such alternative programs represent the kinds of approaches which, in the opinion of these observers, seem best suited to the developmental needs of children. Most of the practices so identified share certain common characteristics which might be considered as criterial attributes of the open classroom approach. These characteristics include a process rather than a product orientation; provision for self-selection of activities on the part of the children; attempts to deal with skills and knowledge in an integrated or orchestrated way (in contrast to the

compartmentalization of academic "subjects" which is typical in most curricula); the random or heterogeneous grouping of children, intended to make it possible for the children to learn from one another (in contrast to tracking or other forms of ability grouping); and a style of teacher behavior which enables the teacher to respond to the behavioral cues presented by individual children and to use these cues as a basis for building on or extending what a child already knows, what he can already do, and what he is interested in.

Most educators and critics who are familiar with the varieties of open education programs are careful to point out that open education practices should not be permissive and the teacher is responsible for the management of the educational environment and the planning of growth-facilitating experiences for the students.³ Obviously, the skills required to arrange and manage an open and productive educational environment are ones for which few teachers have received appropriate training and experience. Teachers such as Kozol and Kohl, who have identified the need for change for themselves and have attempted to work out their own solutions, report the monumental problems which have confronted them in their attempts to develop new approaches. Even in the open education approaches of the British infant schools, which have attracted so much attention in this country, good open classroom programs are operating in a minority of the infant schools,⁴ and those which are good have been a long time in developing. In many instances, spokesmen for the open classroom approach appear to have pinned their hopes for the adoption of more sensitive and humanistically-oriented educational processes to this approach as a result of published accounts of observers of the British infant schools, such as those of Feather-

stone⁵ and Weber,⁶ and critiques⁷ of the American educational establishment and of the teacher-training programs which help to perpetuate it. One must wonder, however, how successfully the better exemplars of the British classrooms can be emulated by American teachers, considering that the success of the new infant school program is highly dependent upon the individual skill of the teacher.⁸

There is far from universal agreement among American educational reformers that the open classroom approach provides a viable answer to the problems of education in this country, but even if one assumes that this presents one hopeful alternative, one must ask how it can possibly be implemented by more than a handful of gifted and energetic teachers. In spite of the many admonitions that the teacher in the open classroom is still responsible for the learning of the children in her charge, and that the classroom should reflect purposeful activity rather than chaos, none of the advocates of the open classroom proceed much beyond this word of caution in providing potential implementers with concrete guidelines for teaching in an open classroom. Kohl, for example, advises that one must hold a belief in the potential of the students and have a great deal of patience. Beyond the advice that all of this takes time, he offers very little specific guidance. The result when teachers attempt to change their instructional approaches is, more frequently than not, a marked discrepancy between the emulated practices and the reality of the classroom. This discrepancy is perhaps best described by Hapgood.⁹ In the better open classrooms which she observed in England,

There was a quiet hum of children working and talking together, moving carefully and purposefully in the room that was always crowded with children and things to learn from. Work went on all over the school--in the corridors, in the assembly hall,

outdoors. The work of each child was his own, unique to him and respected as such. (p. 66)

In contrast to this description, Hapgood observes that American attempts to follow suit often result in a poor copy. Her characterization is all too frequently accurate. In a typical poor copy,

The class is "activity-centered," but the activity is often aimless and noisy, and sometimes destructive. Books are used very little, and children are allowed to disturb other children with dramatic play, carpentry, blocks, or musical instruments. The teacher is so busy trying to maintain some semblance of order that she has little time to help children individually or to record growth. The flexible order she admired in the British model has become chaos. (p. 66)

Some enthusiastic supporters of open classrooms see this approach to education as the answer to the mindlessness which Silberman identifies as the source of most of the ills of the American Public School System. He says,

... what is mostly wrong with the public schools is due not to venality, or indifference or stupidity, but to mindlessness. (p. 10)
... by and large, teachers, principals, and superintendents are decent, intelligent, and caring people who try to do their best by their lights. If they make a botch of it, and an uncomfortably large number do, it is because it simply never occurs to more than a handful to ask why they are doing what they are doing--to think seriously or deeply about the purposes or consequences of education. (p. 11)

To Silberman, mindlessness reflects the lack of sound educational philosophy, and he seems to imply that we can avoid mindlessness by thinking deeply and seriously about educational purposes and about the relationships between the things we do and important educational purposes. It seems very likely, however, that teachers whose attempts to open their classrooms have resulted in something like the poor copy described by Hapgood have done some serious thinking about their goals, and have attempted to adopt new practices to achieve those goals. In following Silberman's admonition they have not been able to avoid mindlessness, because to do

so requires us to attend with total seriousness to more than philosophy. Mindlessness is not a "state of mind" which can be corrected solely by thinking seriously about education purposes. While traditional programs may be guilty of thinking too little about important long-range educational outcomes, those of us who are interested in promoting more open programs may be guilty of focusing excessively upon the broader and more long-term educational outcomes to the neglect of the steps instrumental to getting there. If we are to think seriously about relationships between the things we do and truly significant education outcomes, as Silberman admonishes us to do, it is vital that we be able to demonstrate that the means which we advocate lead to the results which we cherish. Silberman's lucid critique of American education focuses upon the need for a philosophy to guide our actions. But, as important as a guiding philosophy is, it provides only half of an essential strategy for the specification of worthwhile educational practices. The missing strand in Silberman's suggestions for dealing with mindlessness is science, for science can provide a corrective mechanism to determine if our means lead to the ends which our philosophy dictates. The methods of science can make it possible for us to specify the results of our educational efforts in concrete terms. This sort of objectification of the relationship between our efforts and our outcomes is also necessary if such programs are to be maintained as viable alternatives for those who value the goals which open classrooms should be designed to promote. Otherwise, the several varieties of open and flexible programs will meet the same fate as did progressive education.

Since 1968 the Arizona Center for Early Childhood Education has been involved in the dissemination of the Tucson Early Education Model, a comprehensive educational program which encompasses all of the criterial at-

tributes of the open classroom as specified in the introduction to this paper. The experience of disseminating this program has demonstrated clearly that if there is ever to be widespread implementation of this or similar programs, the structure of the learning environment and the teaching methods must be concretely specified for teachers. To many advocates of the open classroom such specification may seem to be a contradiction to the principles of open education. We now see it as essential to the survival of these programs, and the challenge is to provide a guiding structure which will facilitate flexibility and openness. If we fail to provide this specification, together with the necessary training strategies to prepare teachers for open classrooms, we will be forced to select those rare teachers who already have the requisite skills rather than to train teachers in these competencies. If we settle for the former alternative, the scope of change in public education will be very limited indeed.

The character of the Tucson Early Education Model¹⁰ and the procedures which characterize it have been described elsewhere.¹¹ In brief, in our efforts to provide concrete guidance for instructional personnel, we have found it necessary to specify how certain psychological principles may be used to provide an effective learning environment for young children. The full potential for application of knowledge from the knowledge base of psychology has generally had a minimal influence on educational practice. In traditional programs the principal influences have been felt in the areas of psychological and educational measurement and in the development

of curriculum materials which reflect the psychologist's concern with matters of sequence, small learning increments, redundancy, and review. In many ways these influences have been counter-productive because they have been applied mechanistically, in isolation from the informed use of other psychological knowledge.

In contrast to the lack of impact of psychological knowledge on practice which prevails in most American public schools, educational critics such as Silberman and Featherstone often argue that open classroom practices are articulated to theories of learning and development. A crucial point that is overlooked by these writers is that in the instances which they cite, psychological theories are used to generate educational practice, and the worthiness of the practice is then supported by reference to its relationship to theory. This kind of circular reasoning is not science. It is an all-too-frequent example of how the products of science are translated into philosophy. The methods of science come into play only when procedures are instituted to demonstrate in a verifiable way that given practices, whatever their genesis, lead to predictable and specific outcomes.

As important as principles of child development may be in suggesting appropriate educational practices, we have found it necessary also to be specific in training teachers in the use of additional behaviors for organizing and managing the learning environment. For example, stage theories such as Piaget's, which have had a profound influence on the development of open classroom programs, do not account for the influence of such variables as modeling, cuing and reinforcement in promoting the psychological growth of children.

In the natural environment children acquire many complex skills, largely through observational learning. They most certainly also learn much of their attitudinal and value systems through observation of the behavior of significant others in their environments. It is, therefore, surprising that so little attention has been paid by educational developers to the potential uses of modeling. The teacher who is aware of the ways in which modeling influences children, and of the conditions which facilitate the effects of modeling, is in a position to influence the growth of children in a very positive and natural way. She must learn to use in a planned and systematic way the forces which are already influencing the development of the child.

Another way in which the environment can teach is by providing cues. Cues are objects or events in the environment which, as the child learns to discriminate them, signal appropriate behavior. Most teachers rely upon a very limited range of cues, largely restricted to the use of their own oral language to control children and tell them what to do and when, and to written instructions provided on the chalk board or in a workbook. Because they are not skilled in helping children to discriminate and respond to a wider variety of cues, many teachers must spend their own precious time with routine activities, such as taking roll, and telling groups of children what to do next and which materials to use. Through the use of a greater variety of cues, such as are afforded by the arrangement of materials in interest centers, symbols or furniture arrangements which signal how many children can be involved in a given activity at a given time, and instructions which might be read by a student leader of a small group to identify a range of optional activities and outcomes which might contribute to a group effort, the teacher is freed to work with individuals

or small groups of children as the mechanics take care of themselves. Since the teacher cannot be everywhere at once, these cues also help to ensure that children will be involved in purposeful activity. An advantage of heterogeneous groups of children in this context is that children who know how to do a particular task serve as models, and thereby provide cues, for children who are less advanced in that particular activity.

A third characteristic of an effective learning environment is that it reinforces children for their purposeful and constructive behavior. The teacher described in Hapgood's example, the one who spent her time trying to manage a chaotic situation, was in all likelihood perpetuating unproductive behavior by reinforcing it with her attention. In most such situations, the children who are engaged in purposeful activities receive very little attention. Through the skillful use of social reinforcement the teacher can guide children to participate in activities which will be growth enhancing for them.

There are other problems which arise in an open classroom which teachers must be prepared to deal with if they are to fulfill their obligation as teachers. Even in good open classrooms where children appear to be moving about quietly and purposefully, pursuing learning opportunities, the teacher, especially with the younger children, must be skilled in helping children to deal with the tremendous stimulus load which is characteristic of a rich open classroom environment. While the environment with a rich supply of printed material, both commercial and child-produced, may provide an appropriate condition for the meaningful application and practice of reading skills, the teacher must have techniques for helping the child to reduce the stimulus load initially for the acquisition of skills which

may then be applied in the rich reading environment of the classroom. Enthusiastic supporters of the open classroom are prone to tell heart-warming anecdotes about those students who are moving along smoothly in the acquisition of specific abilities, such as reading or quantitative skills, but the many children who are unable to sort out for themselves the attributes to focus upon for acquisition are placed in an untenable situation. These are just a few general examples of psychological principles which teachers can be trained to apply systematically to promote productive activity and child growth in an open environment.

The application of principles such as those above results in classroom behavior which would appear to involve children in worthwhile learning activities. Even when the process appears to be productive, however, it is essential that the program incorporate monitoring procedures to determine if the anticipated growth in children's social and intellectual competencies is indeed taking place. In the open classrooms of the British infant schools there is a widely held belief that "... the appropriate means to evaluate the reported outcomes of new infant school practice are not currently available."¹² This belief is widely shared by advocates of the open classroom in this country. These supporters would also share the assumptions that "... the best measure of a child's work is his work itself," and that "one needs to observe the cumulative effects of experience over long periods of time before evaluation of a child's progress is relevant."¹³

Within the several varieties of open classrooms teachers pursue this purpose by making continuous anecdotal records of children's behavior. On the surface, at least, it would seem that such anecdotal recordings might provide meaningful evidence concerning the growth and needs of individual children. In practice, however, such records tend to become burdensome,

fail to provide comparable information across situations, and are not known for their reliability. Thus, we are faced with the dilemma that at a time when legislators and other public officials are increasingly calling upon educators to be accountable for the effects of their educational programs, the more open and flexible types of programs are in a relatively poor position to demonstrate, in terms that are justifiable to the people whom those programs are intended to serve, just what growth is taking place in children who are program participants.

We have a situation in which open education programs, quite properly designed more to respond to children than to impose upon them, have been reluctant to submit themselves to traditional modes of evaluation (i.e., standardized achievement tests) and yet designers of open programs have a poorly developed technology of their own for assessing their own principal effects. As a result, it appears that the options available to the American public for selecting from among different kinds of educational programs are becoming increasingly restricted because of funding priorities which dictate educational outcomes in very narrowly stated and simplistic terms. If open education programs are to receive a true test, and if they are to be offered as a realistic option to American educational consumers, then careful attention must be given to the development of new techniques for the assessment of programs.

Psychologists and educators at the Arizona Center for Early Childhood Education have been grappling with this problem for two years now, addressing themselves to the question, "Is there some way in which the advantages which behavioral objectives offer for relating practice to outcome may be appropriately adapted to open and flexible kinds of educational programs, or is it true, as most proponents of the open classroom appear to believe,

that behavioral objectives must be considered an anathema to open education programs?"

We have been working to develop behavioral objectives for the domains of motivation, language, learning to learn skills, social competence, and the traditional academic skills areas, and to do so in a manner that makes it possible for decisions regarding specific objectives to be made at the classroom level, by teachers and by the children themselves. For each of the domains mentioned above we are developing a framework within which it becomes possible for the teacher to have concrete and reliable data which monitors the child's growth over time, and provides procedures whereby the data are obtained from the child's own overt behavior. These provisions would appear to meet both of the assumptions mentioned earlier regarding the nature of appropriate assessment of child growth in an open classroom program.

This work is far from completed, but some examples from our organization of the motivational domain may suffice to indicate the direction which this effort is taking. An important assumption in our program is that responsibility for learning must in the final analysis rest with the student. This does not imply that the educational program takes a laissez faire position with respect to motivation and expects that the intrinsic interest in activities and materials of the classroom will be sufficient to involve the learner in profitable learning activities. On the contrary, implicit in the rationale of our educational program is the assumption that the school must provide the student with skills which will assist him in becoming a self-motivated, independent learner. One cannot assume that left to their own devices, children will, on the basis of some innate wisdom, be able to select more and more growth-promoting activities from among

the many options provided them in an open classroom. For example, we have evidence that the use of books may decrease to almost a zero level over the period of the primary school years if teachers do not behave in a manner that moves children to increase the range of options which they select.¹⁴

In any discussion of open classroom programs, the issue of adult control versus freedom comes up. In many ways this is a straw-man issue. If, for example, a child always selects the same kind of activity, and the teacher takes no action to bring him into involvement with other available options, his freedom is restricted in a very real sense. If through modeling and reinforcement principles the teacher can bring a child into more frequent interaction with written materials, and if she helps him to acquire specific skills in working independently with these materials, his feeling of competency and interest in the materials or information will soon provide all the reinforcement necessary to attract him to the use of these learning opportunities. As he acquires some skill in reading, more and more options become available to him as he gains independence in handling the printed materials which are incorporated in many learning activities. It is not difficult for a teacher to influence this chain of events, and as a result the child's freedom is increased because a wider and wider range of options become available to him, and he can become self-motivated.

In sharp contrast, in many educational programs the student is consistently manipulated during his entire school career by the teacher or by packaged educational materials. Characteristically, in these programs, little is done to teach the student how to set his own goals, how to establish his procedures to achieve these goals, and how to make his own evaluative decisions regarding goal attainment. Therefore, in our attempts to specify

important categories of behavioral outcomes within the motivational domain, we have identified four goal classes, approach behavior, self-goal setting, self-evaluation, and maintenance of on-task behavior. Each of these goal classes is further subdivided to provide for progressive movement along dimensions of complexity and independence. At the level of specific behavioral objectives there are provisions for the specification of objectives by both the child and the teacher. For example, for a child who approaches the teacher or other adults in the classroom only for comfort or reassurance, the teacher may decide that it would be worthwhile for the child to also initiate interaction with adults for the purpose of seeking information relating to learning tasks.

Time will not allow for a detailed description of the procedures for recording continuous child progress in this or any of the other domains for which objectives are being developed. The results of efforts in our psychological services program, however, suggest that monitoring can be accomplished without placing an undue burden upon the classroom teacher.¹⁵

In view of the political temperament of our times it seems that anything short of success in attempts such as this will result in a dubious future for the open classroom movement. If open classrooms are to survive and influence the lives of more than a few select children, we must avoid the mindlessness that comes from poor specification of our instructional procedures and of the training techniques required to help teachers to implement these procedures. We must also work continuously to find appropriate means to bring the methods of science into concert with sound educational philosophy in order to document the effects of our efforts, and to provide a sound basis for evolving better procedures.

In a time when technology threatens to depersonalize our social institutions, the open classroom movement is seen by some as a way to promote humanistic modes of helping children to realize their potential. But it is doubtful that open classroom programs can survive simply by hoisting the banner of humanism. Real humanism rests not so much in our intentions, as it does in the actual results of our efforts to facilitate the growth of the children in our charge.

Footnotes

¹Herber Kohl, The Open Classroom (New York, 1969) or James Herndon, How to Survive in Your Native Land (New York, 1971).

²Charles Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom (New York, 1970).

³Silberman or Marilyn Hapgood, "The Open Classroom: Protect It From Its Friends," The Saturday Review, September 18, 1971, pp. 66-69 & 75.

⁴Joseph Featherstone, Schools Where Children Learn (New York, 1971).

⁵Featherstone.

⁶Evelyn Weber, Early Childhood Education: Perspectives in Change (Worthington, Ohio, 1970).

⁷Silberman.

⁸Ellis Evans, Contemporary Influences in Early Childhood Education (New York, 1971).

⁹Hapgood.

¹⁰Arizona Center for Early Childhood Education, Tucson Early Education Model (Tucson, Arizona, 1969).

¹¹Carol Rubow and Joseph Fillerup, The Professional Response (Tucson, Arizona, 1970) or Violet Nelson and Betty Richards, Orchestrated Instruction: A Cooking Experience (Tucson, Arizona, 1969) or Alice Paul, Alice Smith and Ronald Henderson, Intellectual Kits: Tools for Instruction in the Tucson Early Education Model (Tucson, Arizona, 1970) or Arline Hobson, Intellectual Implications of a Basic Sight Vocabulary (Tucson, Arizona, 1969a) and "Systematic Language Modeling," Contemporary Education, 40, No. 4, February, 1969b or Betty Richards, Mapping: An Introduction to Symbols (Tucson, Arizona, 1970).

¹²Evans, p. 273.

¹³Evans, pp. 273-274

¹⁴Sadie Grimmer, Billie Underwood and Evelyn Brackney, Choice Behavior in a Free Choice Setting (Tucson, Arizona, 1970).

¹⁵John Bergan, Elaine Nicholson, Sara Currin, Karen Haberman, Richard Brown, Dal Curry and Margaret Ronstadt, Tucson Early Education Psychological Services Program (Tucson, Arizona, 1971).

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